

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 32814 01 OF 02 021217Z

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AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMCONSUL SONGKHLA
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMCONSUL UDORN

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 32814

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SREF, EAGR, ECON, TH
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO NORTHEAST THAILAND

SUMMARY. IN THE COURSE OF A 3-DAY VISIT TO NORTHEAST THAILAND WITH MY ISRAELI AND JAPANESE COLLEAGUES, I VISITED VARIOUS DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND SPENT AN AFTERNOON AND EVENING WITH THE KING AND QUEEN WHO ARE CURRENTLY LIVING IN THEIR NEW COUNTRY RESIDENCE IN THE PUPHON MOUNTAINS. THE KING IS DOING EVERYTHING HE CAN TO SHOW THE FLAG AND IS VIGOROUSLY PURSUING A PROGRAM INTENDED TO CREAT WATER CATCHMENTS AND MINOR
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PAGE 02 BANGKO 32814 01 OF 02 021217Z

IRRIGATION PROJECTS THROUGHOUT THE AREA. HE SEEKS

TO BRING HEIGHTENED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TO FARMERS ADJOINING THE COMMUNIST BASE IN THE PUPHON MOUNTAIN RANGE, AND HE AND THE QUEEN ARE CONDUCTING AN INTENSIVE SERIES OF VISITS TO REMOTE VILLAGES AND OUTPOSTS. THE KING DISPLAYED ONLY RELATIVE CONCERN REGARDING THE SITUATION IN THE NORTHEAST, AND EXPRESSED GREAT CONFIDENCE IN THE DETERMINATION OF THE THAI PEOPLE TO RESIST COMMUNIST PRESSURE.

1. SITUATION IN NAKHON PHANOM

AT THE INVITATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION (DTEC), I ACCOMPANIED THE ISRAELI AND JAPANESE AMBASSADORS ON A 3-DAY VISIT TO NORTHEASTERN THAILAND THIS WEEK. THE PARTY WENT VIA COMMERCIAL AIR TO KHON KAEN, THEN TO NAKHON PHANOM BY HELICOPTER. IN THE COURSE OF AN EXTENDED MEETING WITH THE GOVERNOR OF NAKHON PHANOM, THE SITUATION ACROSS THE BORDER IN LAOS WAS REVIEWED IN CONSIDERABLE DETAIL. ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNOR WAS IMPRESSIVELY DYNAMIC AND SELF-ASSURED AND HAD LONG EXPERIENCE IN THE AREA, I BELIEVE HIS COMMENTS ON THE SITUATION SHOULD BE TREATED WITH CONSIDERABLE RESERVE.

A. MILITARY SITUATION

THE GOVERNOR APPEARED TO BE SERIOUSLY CONCERNED OVER THE HOSTILE FORCES DEPLOYED ACROSS THE RIVER IN LAOS. ACCORDING TO HIM, THERE WERE EIGHT NORTH VIETNAMESE REGIMENTS IN THE TAKHEK AREA. ALTHOUGH CONSIDERABLE QUESTIONING ON THIS POINT LED HIM TO SAY THAT HE WAS REFERRING TO UNITS OF APPROXIMATELY 200 MEN (BATTALIONS?), THIS DOES NOT ACCORD WITH OUR OB HOLDINGS. THE GOVERNOR STATED THAT IN ADDITION TO THE NORTH VIETNAMESE THERE WERE VERY LARGE CONCENTRATIONS OF PATHET LAO FORCES. HE SAID THAT THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT WITHIN LAOS WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY ACTIVE AND THAT THE TACTICAL SITUATION WAS SIMILAR TO THAT WHICH HAD EARLIER EXISTED IN WARTIME. IT WAS, HOWEVER, THE COMMUNISTS WHO WERE NOW LOCKED INTO GARRISONS AND WHO WERE BEING

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 32814 01 OF 02 021217Z

SUBJECTED TO HARASSMENT ON THE ROADS.

COMMENT: THE GOVERNOR'S VIEW OF THE MILITARY THREAT FROM ACROSS THE RIVER APPEARS TO ME TO BE HIGHLY EXAGGERATED, BUT HIS DESCRIPTION OF THE HARASSMENT UNDERGONE BY THE NORTH VIETNAMESE AND PATHET LAO FORCES IS CONFIRMED BY OTHER SOURCES.

B. REFUGEES

THE GOVERNOR STATED THAT APPROXIMATELY 20 REFUGEES A DAY CROSS THE RIVER FROM LAOS INTO HIS PROVINCE. AT THE TIME OF THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER, THE REFUGEES HAD BEEN SENIOR OFFICIALS AND PERSONS CONNECTED WITH THE WAR EFFORT. THESE HAD BEEN FOLLOWED BY MERCHANTS AND OTHER PROSPEROUS INDIVIDUALS. NOW THE REFUGEES WERE PERSONS OF HUMBLE BACKGROUND WHO FOUND LIFE UNDER THE COMMUNISTS IMPOSSIBLE. THE GOVERNOR SAID PRELIMINARY DEBRIEFING OF REFUGEES WAS DONE BY THE POLICE WHO THEN TRANSFERRED THEM ON TO REFUGEE CAMPS WHERE THEY WERE FURTHER QUESTIONED.

C. TRADE

THE GOVERNOR STRESSED THAT THE SEVERITY OF THE LAO SECURITY FORCES WAS SUCH THAT ALL UNOFFICIAL TRADE ACROSS THE RIVER HAD BEEN BROUGHT TO AN END. THE ONLY OFFICIAL CROSSING POINT NOW OPEN, ASIDE FROM VIENTIANE/NONG KHAI IS MUKDAHAN/SAVANNAKHET. THE ONLY TRADE THERE IS LUMBER WHICH IS BOUGHT BY THAI SAW MILLS FROM THE LAO GOVERNMENT ENTITY CHARGED WITH THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SALE OF LOGS. THE GOVERNOR SEEMED UNCLEAR ON THE SCALE OF THIS TRADE BUT SAID IT AMOUNTED TO APPROXIMATELY \$2 MILLION PER ANNUM, AND THAT ALL TRANSACTIONS WERE HANDLED IN CASH (BAHT). HE SAID THIS CASH FLOW INTO LAOS WAS A GREAT WORRY TO HIM AS HE BELIEVED THAT LARGE AMOUNTS OF THESE BAHT WERE BEING SENT IN THAILAND FOR SUBVERSION.

2. NA KAE DISTRICT

AFTER A BRIEF STOP AT MUKDAHAN TO INSPECT A
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PAGE 04 BANGKO 32814 01 OF 02 021217Z

RESETTLEMENT AREA, THE PARTY PROCEEDED TO NA KAE DISTRICT FOR A BRIEFING BY THE DISTRICT CHIEF AND A TOUR OF ANOTHER RESETTLEMENT AREA. NA KAE DISTRICT IS WIDELY BELIEVED TO BE THE MOST DIFFICULT DISTRICT IN THAILAND OWING TO THE SCALE OF COMMUNIST ACTIVITY EMANATING FROM THE PUPHON MOUNTAIN BASE AREA. THE DISTRICT CHIEF, WHO SEEMED TO BE PARTICULARLY DYNAMIC, HAS DEVELOPED A HAMLET EVALUATION SYSTEM FOR THE DISTRICT AND APPEARED TO UNDERSTAND THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PACIFICATION VERY CLEARLY. HE AND HIS STAFF ARE REPORTEDLY CONSTANTLY ON THE ROAD AND ARE APPLYING A FAIRLY SOPHISTICATED MIX OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROGRESS TO THE EMBATTLED COMMUNITIES UNDER THEIR AUTHORITY. THE PARTY VISITED SEVERAL PREVIOUSLY INACCESSIBLE VILLAGES WHERE VILLAGE

SELF-DEFENSE FORCES HAVE BEEN CREATED AND IN WHICH
CONSPICUOUS EFFORTS AT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 32814 02 OF 02 021231Z

44

ACTION EA-09

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 32814

3. 3. TOUR WITH THE KING

AFTER SPENDING THE NIGHT AT THE NAM UN DAM, THE
PARTY PROCEEDED TO THE NEW ROYAL COMPLEX SOUTHWEST
OF SAKON NAKHON AND ACCOMPANIED THE KING AND QUEEN
ON A 7-HOUR MOTORCADE THROUGH WHAT THE ENOURAGE
DESCRIBED AS A "PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE AREA." ALTHOUGH
THIS ASPECT OF THE OUTING MAY WELL HAVE BEEN OVER-
STATED, THE PRESENCE OF SECOND ARMY COMMANDER,

LIEUTENANT GENERAL PREM TINSULANON, AND THE FACT
THAT SOLDIERS AND POLICE WERE POSTED THE ENTIRE LENGTH
OF THE ITINERARY INDICATE THAT THERE WERE SOME GROUNDS
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BANGKO 32814 02 OF 02 021231Z

FOR CONCERN.

4. THE FIRST STOPS OF THE CAVALCADE WERE IN REMOTE
VILLAGES ON THE RIDGE LINE RUNNING NORTHWEST FROM
THE PALACE. ALTHOUGH THE POPULATION SEEMED WELCOMING
AND FRIENDLY, THE KING LATER STATED THAT HE FELT A DEGREE
OF CHILL. HE AND OTHERS DREW ATTENTION TO THE
FACT THAT THERE WERE VERY FEW YOUNG MEN IN THESE
HAMLETS, NOTING DARKLY THAT "THEY WERE IN THE MOUN-
TAINS." AS THE CAVALCADE CAME INTO THE PLAINS, THE
ATMOSPHERE CHANGED AND VILLAGE SCOUTS AND OTHER
MANIFESTATIONS OF GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY BECAME MORE
APPARENT. AT EACH STOP, THE KING AND DIRECTOR OF THE
IRRIGATION DEPARTMENT ENGAGED THE LOCAL CHIEFS AND
HEADMEN IN PROLONGED DISCUSSIONS OF THEIR WATER NEEDS,
AND THE PARTY TRAMPED TO 4 SITES AT WHICH MINOR
IRRIGATION PROJECTS HAD BEEN PROPOSED. INDICATIVE
OF THE KING'S ROLE IN THIS FIELD WAS HIS ELIMINATION
OF ONE PROJECT ON THE GROUNDS THAT THE PROPOSED LAKE
WOULD COVER VALUABLE PADDY LAND. HE WAS ALSO VERY
FLEXIBLE IN CONSIDERING POSSIBILITIES OTHER THAN THOSE
PROPOSED BY THE IRRIGATION STAFF.

5. THE KING AND QUEEN ARE OPERATING IN THE NORTHEAST
AS THEY HAVE BEEN IN OTHER PARTS OF THAILAND. WHILE
IT IS HARD FOR A FOREIGNER TO JUDGE THE POLITICAL
IMPACT OF THESE VISITS, THE OBVIOUS ATTACHMENT OF THE
POPULATION TO THEIR MAJESTIES IS VERY EVIDENT AND THE
STAFFWORK PERFORMED BY THE ENTOURAGE IN PROVIDING
LOLLIPOPS, JERSEYS, MEDICAL AUTHORIZATIONS, AND NOTING
VARIOUS INDIVIDUAL PROBLEMS IS THE KIND OF THING
WHICH IS GOOD POLITICS ANYWHERE.

6. DINNER WITH THE KING.

AT DINNER, WHICH BEGAN AT 10 P.M., THE KING HAD
MAPS OF THE AREA AT HIS ELBOW AND EXPLAINED THE
CAMPAIGN HE IS CONDUCTING TO SURROUND THE PUPHON
MOUNTAIN BASE AREA WITH VILLAGES TO WHICH THE GOVERN-
MENT HAS BROUGHT SIGNIFICANT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.
THE KING WAS VERY CRITICAL OF MAJOR IRRIGATION SCHEMES
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 BANGKO 32814 02 OF 02 021231Z

NOTING WITH A SMILE THAT HE TOO WOULD BE A COMMUNIST IF BUREAUCRATS IN BANGKOK COVERED HIS LAND WITH WATER AND COMPELLED HIM TO LIVE ON A DRY HILLTOP. HE OBVIOUSLY BELIEVES THAT HIS PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE DEGREE TO WHICH LOCAL ADVICE ON MANY SMALL DAMS AND CATCHMENT AREAS IS BEING SOUGHT WILL BRING QUICK RESULTS. THE KING EXPRESSED GREAT CONFIDENCE THAT THE LOYALTY OF HIS SUBJECTS IN THE AREA WOULD BE MAINTAINED AND SHOWED A SOPHISTICATED AND TOLERANT UNDERSTANDING OF THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS WHICH HAVE LED TO THE EXISTING STATE OF DISSIDENCE.

7. THE KING SEEMED LIGHTHEARTED WITH REGARD TO THE HEAVY SECURITY PRECAUTIONS WHICH HAD BEEN TAKEN FOR HIM THAT DAY. IN THE COURSE OF THE DRIVE, HE HAD JOKED ABOUT THE POSSIBLE DANGERS AHEAD AND HAD DRAWN MY ATTENTION TO THE FACT THAT HE WAS DRIVING A 4-DOOR WAGONEER FROM WHICH HIS BODYGUARDS COULD JUMP MORE RAPIDLY THAN THEY COULD FROM THE 2-DOOR RANGE ROVER HE CUSTOMARILY DRIVES ON THESE OUTINGS. HE DESCRIBED THE SEARCH OPERATIONS AND THE OUTPOSTING OF THE ROADS HE HAD TRAVELLED AS A SHOW OF FORCE WHICH WAS EXAGGERATED BUT WHICH WOULD SHOW THE COMMUNISTS THE ABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO ASSERT ITS SWAY.

8. ENERGY.

WHEN THE CONVERSATION TURNED TO THE UTILIZATION OF GAS FROM THE GULF OF SIAM, THE KING EXPRESSED HIS RELUCTANT SUPPORT OF THE PROJECT, NOTING THAT THAILAND SHOULD MAKE USE OF THIS NATURAL RESOURCE BUT COMMENTING THAT ITS EVENTUAL DEPLETION SHOULD BE ENVISAGED. MORE THAN HE EVER HAS ON PREVIOUS OCCASIONS, THE KING HELD FORTH ON THE IMPORTANCE HE ATTACHES TO ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND THE NEED TO REDUCE ENERGY CONSUMPTION IN THE KINGDOM, IF POSSIBLE. THE KING SEEMED TO HAVE HEARD THAT THE INTENTION OF THE UNION OIL COMPANY WAS TO INSIST ON A GAS PRICE COMMENSURATE WITH \$12.00 A BARREL OIL. HE SEEMED TO CONSIDER THIS PRICE ABSURD. HE ALSO HELD FORTH TO THE JAPANESE AMBASSADOR ON THE THEME THAT RATHER THAN EXPORTING CORN TO FEED CHICKENS

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PAGE 04 BANGKO 32814 02 OF 02 021231Z

IN JAPAN, IT WOULD BE IN THAILAND'S INTEREST TO EXPORT FROZEN BROILERS AND THUS PROVIDE MORE EMPLOYMENT AND PROFIT FOR THE THAI FARMER.

9. THE KING'S FINAL TOPIC WAS THE M-16 RIFLE AND HE

DISCOURSED AT SOME LENGTH ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN M-16S WITH AND WITHOUT A CHROMIUM BORE. THIS SUBJECT WAS TOO ARCAIC FOR ANY OF THE GUESTS INCLUDING GENERAL PREM.

10. COMMENT.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LARGE COMPLEX OF ROYAL VILLAS ON THE SLOPE OF THE PUPHON MOUNTAINS AND THE TIME THE ROYAL FAMILY ARE DEDICATING TO AN INTENSE SCHEDULE OF VISITS TO THE NORTHEAST INDICATE VERY CLEARLY THE DETERMINATION OF THE KING TO DO WHAT HE CAN TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION THERE. ALTHOUGH HE HAS NO DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY FOR SELECTING OR CARRYING OUT PROJECTS, THE EXPRESSION OF A ROYAL VIEW THAT SOMETHING WOULD BE DESIRABLE SEEMS TO HAVE A VERY INVIGORATING EFFECT ON THAI BUREAUCRATS. ALTHOUGH THE KING APPEARS TO BE SERIOUSLY CONCERNED, THE ATMOSPHERE OF CONFIDENCE WHICH HE DISPLAYS DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE FEIGNED AND HE IS OBVIOUSLY DEEPLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE PLIGHT OF THE VILLAGERS IN THE BONE DRY, IMPOVERISHED NORTHEAST. IT APPEARS TO US THAT THE AMOUNT OF ROYAL ATTENTION THE AREA WILL BE GETTING FROM NOW ON CANNOT HELP BUT IMPROVE CONDITIONS THERE.

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